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STATE FOR NEA/ARP (DBERNS), NEA/PPD (DBENZE, CWHITTLESEY, PAGNEW),
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SUBJECT: FACE OFF--AMERICAN AND KUWAITI WOMEN MEET ON THE BASKETBALL
COURT

REF: 05 KUWAIT 2996

¶1. Summary: Embassy Kuwait arranged a rematch between Camp Arifjan's American military women's basketball team and Kuwait's Al-Fatat Sports Club women's team on Thursday, April 27, 2006. The American team defeated the Kuwaiti team on its home court in this second in a series of friendship games, leading by a score of 71-64. Participants and more than 200 observers praised both sides for the public display of sportsmanship, teamwork and camaraderie. On the heels of initially positive media coverage, Islamists blasted the event in the press, subjecting the Embassy to severe criticism for arranging the competition and allegedly displaying insensitivity to Islamic and Kuwaiti culture. Despite the condemnation from certain quarters, the two teams have agreed to future competitive events. Kuwaiti women and their daughters who want to be able to engage in athletic competition very much want, and deserve, our continued support. End Summary.

Building Friendship through Sports

¶2. The basketball team from Kuwait's Al-Fatat women's sports club hosted the American military women's team from Camp Arifjan on Thursday, April 27, 2006. The game was arranged through the Public Affairs sections of the U.S. Embassy and the Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC). This game was a rematch of the Al-Fatat v. Arifjan match-up held in June, 2005 (which ended 38-37 in favor of the Americans, see reftel).

¶3. The game featured a high-level of play and camaraderie between the two teams. The Kuwaiti team, half of their players in hejab and their blue and orange uniforms, faced off against the blue and red-uniformed Americans in a see-saw battle that ended in a 71-64 victory for the American team. Following the game, players from both sides took pictures together and celebrated their common love of the sport at a light buffet reception.

High-level Support for Women in Sports

¶4. Ambassador and Mrs. LeBaron cheered on the players as did U.S. Major General James A. Kelley (Third Army Deputy Commander), Kuwaiti Brigadier General Khaleel Al-Shamali, Sheikha Fareeha Al-Sabah, and Ms. Fadhlila Al-Shwailan, Chairwoman of Al-Fatat Sports Club. Following the game, the Ambassador presented the players with Embassy gifts, General Kelley presented military coins and Sheikha Fareeha presented medals on behalf of the hosts. Al-Fatat Club chairwoman Fadhlila Al-Shwailan also presented gifts to the Ambassador and General Kelley on behalf of the club.

¶5. The comments following the game from both teams were overwhelmingly positive. One Kuwaiti girl said that she "loved playing against the Americans because that improved the skills of the Kuwaitis." Both sides agreed that such events allowed the "two

sides to get to know one another better and increase the friendship" between the players. One Kuwaiti player summed up the evening, saying, "We love playing the Americans and we hope to do it again. It was a great game."

Islamists Cry "Foul"

¶ 6. In general, press reporting of the game was accurate and positive; however, Islamists used the sporting event to lash out at the Embassy, filing columns and op-eds accusing the U.S. of forcibly imposing western values on Kuwaitis. The furor began in Al-Watan daily Arabic newspaper, which ran both the positive story and the criticism on the top half of the front page with a color photo on April 30.

Post-Game Hoopla

¶ 7. Al-Watan, p. 61, 4/30/06:

--Headline: Al-Khanna (Salafi Kuwaiti MP Fahd Al-Khanna): Why do the Americans meddle with our affairs?
--Al-Khanna said to Al-Watan that "taking such matters lightly and not considering the rules of Islamic Shari'a and the traditions of Kuwaitis is an irritating gesture that challenges the core values of Kuwaiti society. The Ministry of Affairs should have complied and made sure that all organizations under it complied by not mixing men and women and not having women appear before men and men appearing before women as well as adhering to the proper dress code. Al-Khanna also wondered what the commander of the American force has to do with such an event and asked 'What is the story with these people meddling with our affairs? And, is there an agenda to erase the conservative Kuwaiti identity and replace it?'"

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¶ 8. Al-Watan, front page, 5/1/06, By Yousef Al-Nassar:

--Headline: Waliid Al-Osaimi (tribal MP) to the American Ambassador: We did not and will not veil your women, why do you want to dress our women in shorts?

--"MP Waliid Al-Osaimi strongly criticized the Al-Fatat club's hosting of a women's basketball match with a team of American women that was attended by the American Ambassador and a group of men. Kuwait and its people respect the United States of America and in return the United States of America should respect the privacy of the Kuwait society and not impose western values, which are seen by most Kuwaitis as contradictory to the religion of the country and the traditions of Kuwaiti society. Al-Osaimi addressed the American Ambassador saying 'You should not forget that Kuwaitis did not and will not make American women wear the veil, and so you should not try to dress our women in shorts.' He also expressed his contempt for the fact that such shallow event took place under the auspices of respected persons, calling it an attempt to westernize the society and a state-sponsored offense on morals. Al-Osaimi demanded that the Minister of Social Affairs and Labor Shaykh Al Al-Jarrah Al-Sabah take the necessary steps and clearly prevent such unnatural events from taking place."

¶ 9. Al-Seyassah, front page, 5/1/06, By Salim Al-Wawan, Raid Yousef, Khalid Al-Hajry, and Badr Al-Omran:

--Headline: Sharar on the government's withdrawal of the "five": The Ministerial committee's report is the deciding factor and the decision is tomorrow

--"MP Dr. Faisal Al-Muslim launched a violent attack yesterday against the use of women's sports in demeaning ways. He pointed to the basketball game between American girls with the girls of Al-Fatat sports club. He stated that the organizers of such an event violated the traditions and values as well as all rules of Shari'a, especially since it occurred in the presence of men amongst them the American Ambassador and other officials. He added that the American Embassy's press release expresses the uncontrollable urge to westernize Kuwaiti society under the auspices of leading figures in the country calling for a strong governmental position against such practices."

¶ 10. Al-Watan, p. 12, 05/03/06:

"The chairman of the Kuwaiti Society for Fundamental Human Rights Dr. Adel Al-Damkhy rejected Kuwaiti women's participation in basketball games attended by a group of men from the American Embassy and some Kuwaiti officials citing religious and national reasons. According to Dr. Al-Damkhy, 'article 17 of the Organization of Islamic Conference's declaration on human rights states that every person has the right to live in an environment free of corruption and moral disease, which allows him to build his character. The society and state should provide individuals with such a right.' Dr. Al-Damkhy also questioned whether the attendance of men at a women's sporting event is religiously acceptable and if there is any chivalry in it. He called on the proper authorities to investigate the incident. What is more shameful is that the news was broadcast through an American Embassy press release which is viewed as doing two things: first, the American Embassy with this press release is challenging the feeling of the conservative Kuwaiti people. Second, the Embassy broadcast it as a press release as if to say that this was not simply attendance at a basketball game but rather to state a position and to spread certain views."

¶11. Al-Watan, p. 20, 05/03/06:

"Where are the nation's men?" by Ahmed Barak Al-Haify.
"The attendance of men at a women's basketball game is considered a farce to the fullest meaning of the word. One that we cannot be quiet about and one that goes against everything related to the values and traditions of [our] society. I think that doing such things is intended to feel out the Kuwaiti street's reaction as well as that of the National Assembly. If the reaction is normal and the incident is criticized by some members, while others in the society are quiet, then they will consider it a success and follow it with bigger steps towards corruption. And, I state that what the minority does of strange conduct is considered improper by our conservative society. The most important question is 'where are the nation's men?' Do they support it, or do they not know what has happened? I especially call on the members of the National Assembly whose voices were raised for all topics, where are they on these catastrophes? Or, is putting a speed bump in a street and lighting the road leading to the stables more important than the morals of the nation?"

Response to Islamists: Keep Your Opinion to Yourself

¶12. Kuwait Times, p. 2, 05/10/06:

The Kuwait Times printed an opinion piece in response to the Islamist criticisms. Writer Ahmad Al-Khaled wrote, "It is clear from the photos of the event that no less than six Kuwaiti players were in full Islamic dress, hejab and all, basketball in tow. I

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wonder if Al-Ossaimi thinks those players were forced to wear the hejab by the Americans?... What is perplexing to me is Al-Ossaimi's idea that his values represent my values and the values of every Kuwaiti player that day...As a Kuwaiti son, husband and father, I will not accept anyone policing the Kuwaiti women in my life. I will also not accept anyone telling them what they should or shouldn't wear and who they should or shouldn't play sports in front of. I trust the values of the Kuwaiti women in my life to know for themselves what is in accordance with our values and traditions, and whether that includes a basketball game in shorts or a hejab. I for one would be in the stands cheering them on."

¶13. Comment: Despite intense backlash from some Kuwaiti extremist Islamists, the game achieved the goal of bringing together Kuwaiti and American women through their mutual love of sport, competition and engagement. The Embassy plans to continue to pursue sports programming, which effectively engages Kuwaiti youth. Kuwaiti women who want very much to participate in this type of event, and to have their daughters have this kind of opportunity, are grateful for our support. In the weeks since the media coverage of the women's game, several newspapers have run more articles and pictures of Kuwaiti girls involved in sports activities. The game attracted criticism of the Embassy from certain quarters, but we accept that as an anticipated and worthwhile consequence of this type of program. The implicit criticism against Kuwaiti women is disappointing, but not surprising. Lately, Islamists have increased their attacks on

women's sports and on music and cultural events in Kuwait. During the game, most of the Kuwaiti players wore long sweatpants, long-sleeved shirts, and headscarves as part of their uniforms. The coaches of both teams and their referees were men, as has been the custom. Half of the audience was composed of men, most of whom were Kuwaiti family members and security personnel. As with many such controversies, the writers who bashed the Embassy were not in attendance and merely used the event to further their Islamist agenda by creating a furor. The Al-Fatat Sports Club graciously invited the American team and the Embassy to participate in this event and both CFLCC and Embassy Public Affairs worked hard to bring the teams together. Regrettably, CFLCC opted not to host the women's rematch during the recent "Operation Hardwood II" basketball event held May 24-27, 2006 at Camp Arifjan (septel). Photographs of the game are posted on the Embassy's Internet website at: http://kuwait.usembassy.gov/pr_04272006.html. End comment.

For more reporting from Embassy Kuwait, visit:
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